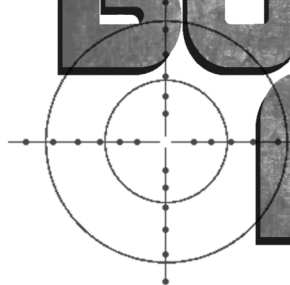


# BULLET BOYS

A graphic of a target with concentric circles and a crosshair, positioned over the word "BULLET".

ALLY  
KENNEN



## Alex

Alex never killed hares. He'd despatched hundreds of rabbits, dozens of foxes, a couple of injured deer, one blind ewe and a nest of bloody-minded wasps. He'd also shot pigeons, crows, rooks, rats, grouse, moles, mink, a road-damaged cat, a sheep-worrying lurcher and a frothing, coughing badger. He'd set snares and traps, laid poison and strung small furry bodies on gibbets. He'd plucked and gutted, skinned and beheaded. But he couldn't bring himself to shoot a *Lepus* because his mother had said it was unlucky.

The sun burned the back of his neck as he sprawled in the heather. He adjusted the rear-sight and curled his finger round the trigger of his air rifle. Below him, in the shimmering heat-soaked valley, a grey-brown blur moved stealthily through the gorse towards the river gorge. It was unusual to see a hare in the open in high summer. Maybe it was diseased. The animal was within his range, caught in the cross hairs. Alex's finger tensed. Dad said, There's nothing crueller than nature. He said if it wasn't for gamekeepers like him, the whole country would be overrun with vermin.

Alex loosened his grip, put on the safety catch and pushed the gun away. Hares didn't do any harm. Deep in the valley, the creature sniffed the air, smelling the danger maybe. Then it vanished in the grass. Alex sat up and wiped his face with the back of his hand. Helena, his mother, also said hares were magic and could make time stand still.

Alex turned to the sun. He loved to feel the heat creep through his skin. Tim, his dad, got dizzy and stupid with too much sun. Not Alex. He could lie still for ages on a baking rock, soaking up the heat like a reptile. A movement on the far hill caught his eye. Alex shouldered the gun and looked through the sight. A line of army boys dotted the rocks and heather, following Irishman's Wall down Belstone Tor. A small squad had been out training since the early hours and were now on a gruelling run. There was a ten-mile circuit from the army barracks over the open moorland of Rowtor, past Strangeways Farm, then up and over the rock-strewn slopes of Belstone and down the other side. Next they would follow the river for a mile or so, through bog, bracken and beef cows, and battle back over the sheep paths round the hill to the camp. The military had a licence to train over huge swathes of the desolate north moors. Their presence was a part of the landscape of Dartmoor as much as the rocks, the tors and the straggly sheep.

Alex counted the soldiers, one, two, three, four. Where was number five?

Earlier this morning Alex had hidden behind the vast stones of the prehistoric settlement that squatted on the side of Cosdon slopes, and had trained his sights on the old mining leat as one by one, five soldiers disappeared into Cosdon Drain. This huge drainpipe ran underground through the valley and the men had to crawl up and down in the darkness and wet.

“It’s a dangerous job.” That’s what Quartermaster Sergeant Furzey said. He sometimes drank in the same pub as Alex’s dad. Furzey said the recruits arrived at the camp as big boys in uniforms and left as human weapons. He said the harder he trained them, the more likely they were to survive. The 8th Battalion, Dart Rifles, or The Bloodhounds, as they were known locally, were a small outfit of three hundred soldiers. They had recently come back, eleven men short, from a twelve-month tour in Afghanistan where, amongst other things, they’d been involved in controlling insurgents in a remote mountainous settlement. The Bloodhounds’ barracks was situated on the next tor and was also used as a training base for soldiers from all over the country. Dartmoor was a harsh, testing place to train. There were three hundred and sixty-eight square miles of moorland scrub, steep tors, rivers, gorges, lakes, bogs, boulders and forests. Alex had seen soldiers struggle through blizzards, weighed down with their packs, even as he helped dig snow-bound sheep out of snowdrifts. A few winters ago there had been a couple of fatalities; the first was a young soldier on a

seventy-two-hour exercise. He'd got lost in freezing fog and died of hypothermia in the sub-zero temperatures. Just a few weeks later a Lance Corporal had fallen out of a tree, where he'd been keeping watch for twenty-four hours, and had broken his neck.

Quartermaster Sergeant Furzey obviously wasn't feeling merciful today and it was a full hour before the first wet soldier emerged from the drain into the boiling moorland heat. He fell into the heather, rubbing slime from his eyes. Alex waited another minute before the second and third soldiers appeared, gasping and coughing. They helped pull the fourth man out of the mouth of the drain. He blinked at the light and was sick all over his boots.

Alex waited. Minutes passed. He watched one of the men shout into the pipe. He could hear him from up here.

"BAZ."

And then there was Furzey in his jeep. A door slammed, there was a radio conversation, but still no fifth soldier. Alex looked at the yellow-brown grass and black reeds of the valley floor. Somewhere, under there, not far from the surface, a human was struggling to get out. Alex felt a prickle of alarm. The drain was four feet high and the water was often two feet deep.

Then at last, fifteen minutes after his mates, the fifth soldier emerged, red as a demon, minus his hat and coughing and spewing as he lay, face down, in the bog, his white-blond hair plastered to his head. Alex

watched as one of the soldiers steadied him, gave him a drink from his canteen and walloped him on the back when he began coughing again.

Minutes later, Furzey had the lot of them up and pounding the sheep paths back on the training circuit.

Sometimes Alex wondered what it would be like to be a soldier. He was only a year or two younger than some of them. He wore similar clothes, greens and browns. He carried a gun when he was working. He kept his hair cut very short. He was interested in the techniques of stalking and shooting. But that's where the resemblance ended. The bottom line was that these men were being trained to kill other men. Sure, some of them were engineers and logistics specialists, some of them were communication experts and skilled mechanics. But there was no escaping the brutal reality, the blood, of their job.

Now the soldiers had vanished into the bracken in a heat haze.

Alex skirted the hill, stepping carefully to avoid the marshes, weaving through the long grass and stones. He picked bilberries as he walked, spreading them on his tongue and tasting the sweetness. As the moor gave way to a set of wild fields, bordered by ancient walls made of large grey stone, he heard a guttural cawing and saw three black crows harassing a buzzard. They'd kill it if they could. Crows were vicious. They attacked the lambs and killed the young pheasants. They ate huge amounts of the pheasants' food. They were also

breeding like mad. Tim said he had never seen so many crows this year; they had overpopulated the area to such an extent that there was less birdsong in the evening round the house. Alex had watched a couple of crows raid a nest of fledgling birds and carry off the young to feed their own. He'd watched them take chicks from the pens, before they'd put the netting up, the little fluffy bodies squeaking in the sky. Alex checked the ammunition in his gun, put it up, aimed at the nearest bird and pulled the trigger. The gun kicked into his shoulder and Alex felt a charge as he watched the crow plummet. A direct hit. He wished Tim had been here to see. The other birds scattered in the sky and Alex jogged down the hillside to retrieve the corpse.

The bird had fallen in amongst the mature trees that lined the river. This was Golden Combe, the boundary between the five-hundred-acre Stonebridge Estate, where Alex and his dad worked, and the moor. Gold was allegedly buried in this valley, hidden centuries before from the Viking marauders. When Alex was a little boy, he'd come out here with a spade and Gaffer, his dog, and dig for it, turning over bright stones and mud in the riverbed.

The sun beat on Alex's neck as he searched the reeds for the fallen bird. The river was slack because of the crazy heat. And here was the dead crow. It looked so perfect, like it could spring into life. It was a huge bird, with a long, sharp beak, still-bright black eyes and

curving claws, sharper than knives. Its blue-black feathers gleamed.



Alex remembered a passage in one of his mother's letters.

*Crows are like creatures from another world, a world of dark fairy stories. They fly easily from the world of humans to other worlds of magic and darkness. Hades or spring; it is all one to them.*

"She had quite an imagination, your mother," Tim had said. "She saw things differently to everyone else."

Alex wouldn't know. She had died when he was five years old. The birthday letters and an album of photographs were all he had. He dropped the limp, feathery body into a small hessian sack and tied it up with a length of string. Then he dumped his satchel and his gun on a wide, flat rock at the water's edge and removed his boots and socks. He dipped his feet in the cold water and watched as the tiny brown sprats darted around his toes. Mature trees, beech, oak and ash, had grown down here, sheltered from the moorland winds. The grass, sheep-nibbled to a perfect turf, was soft and comfortable. A thick curtain of ivy hung between the pair of elderly beech trees that stood either side of the river. Their fat roots coiled down the banks and entwined in the sparkling water. Alex shut his eyes and listened to the sounds of the moor: the wind in the leaves, the bees, sheep, the rushing, gurgling river, and





now something else. There was another noise, like some kind of animal, snuffling and moaning, coming from downriver. Alex peered through the greenery, unable to work it out. He withdrew his feet from the water and pulled on his socks and boots as grunting and splashing noises drew nearer. Whatever it was, it was in the river. A big animal – a deer? Something injured? It sounded like a bloody bear! Alex was about to dart behind the tree when a gasping, muddy, sunburned face emerged beneath a low branch. It was a soldier and his face was twisted with crying. Shocked, Alex backed away, dipping to pick up his gun. If he slipped through the fall of ivy, maybe he wouldn't be seen at all. Alex edged back, taking great care not to crackle the leaves. The soldier was carrying an assault rifle with a powerful optical sight. He was grunting and moaning, making hoarse, animal sounds that reminded Alex of the crow in his bag. He sounded desperate; he was breathing heavily, coughing and snorting and clawing at his burning red face. He wore a helmet covered in webbing and grass and reeds. His combat trousers were wet and coated in mud, and his loose khaki T-shirt was damp and grimy. He was carrying a large heavy-looking backpack and a hydration kit. The soldier stopped dead in the river, saying OH OH OH, then collapsed so that he was sitting right in the water.

Hardly breathing, Alex realized he recognized him. This was the fifth soldier in the pipe, the one who hadn't come out for ages. His name may have been

“Baz”. He wasn’t very old; maybe eighteen or nineteen, a year or so older than Alex. Had he got his rifle wet? Surely he knew better than that? Drips of water shone from the barrel. The lad was a long way downstream from the usual training runs.

Alex manoeuvred himself round the trunk of the beech, deliberating whether he should offer assistance. But no soldier would want to be seen in this state. Now he was rising from the river, water and steam coming off him. What a mess! He was obviously exhausted and overheated. The river was the right place for him. He must have got separated from his mates. It was very easy to lose your bearings on the moors, especially if you were dehydrated, and this lad must be shattered after his ordeal in the pipe this morning. Soldier boy took off his helmet and ran his fingers through his blond hair. As he raised his arms, Alex caught the stink of him and saw a blue tattoo in the shape of a dagger on his wrist. He leaned into the water and splashed his face over and over, the water soaking his neck and shoulders and running down his chest. Paint and mud dripped from his fingers into the water. He shook himself and rubbed his face. He sniffed. Alex waited. He took a compass out of his pocket but as he opened it, it slipped through his fingers and fell into the river. The soldier swore and threw down his pack. He plucked the compass from the water and sat on the flat stone, sniffing. Then he dipped his hat in the current and washed off all the

camouflage. Alex watched the mess of leaves and vine and bracken float downstream.

The soldier looked around him, seeming to take in his surroundings for the first time. Then he stiffened. Unnerved, Alex followed his gaze.

The crow bag lay in a pool of sunlight.

The soldier stood carefully and looked round, long and slow, like he had obviously been taught, and Alex suppressed a shudder. He did not want to be on the end of that stare. He could see the boy's face through a weave of ivy. He had a long chin and bulgy blue eyes. His hands were red with sunburn and smeared with mud and he had a cut on his elbow.

The soldier prodded the bag with the damp barrel of his rifle. He hooked it up and drew it close. When he saw what was inside, he dropped it.


The gift of a dead crow to Her Majesty's army was unlikely to go down well, and the bird was still warm. The expression on the soldier's face switched; he was no longer desperate and weeping but looked as malevolent as that dark old crow.

"Where are you hiding?" he growled in a voice smeared with menace.


Alex bit the inside of his cheek and waited. He had no intention of offering help now.

"Show yourself," roared the soldier.

## *8th Battalion: The Bloodhounds*



*T*wo shots ricocheted out over the valley and the soldier swore. More shots followed. Cursing and coughing, the soldier picked up his hat and his rucksack and blundered over the river, scrambled up on to the bank and pushed through the scrub. Alex watched until he was just a stick man, winding unsteadily through the heather and stones to the curve of the hill. Alex came out from the ivy. He supposed those shots were some kind of army code. He didn't want to hang about so he collected his crow bag and was about to make for home when he spied something lying in the weeds by the side of the river.



The soldier had left his gun behind! He must have lost his mind. Everyone knew this was the one thing a soldier must never, ever do.

What kind of a soldier was he? Alex stared at the weapon. It was a Heckler and Koch assault rifle. His punishment would be unthinkable.

Alex pulled at his lip. There was a footpath on the

other side of the river. This was a place people visited. Someone would find the gun pretty soon if army boy didn't come back for it. But you couldn't just have anyone finding the gun. Guns had to be licensed, and stored under lock and key. What if a kid found it?

But if Alex picked it up and handed it in, then the soldier would know it was he, Alex Jebb, who had seen him cracking up. Alex had witnessed his humiliation and had seen him lose his gun. He could be thrown out of the army for less. At the very least, his reputation would be destroyed forever.

Tim would know what to do. Alex could hand over the gun to his dad and let him take it back to the barracks. He could give it to Quartermaster Sergeant Furzey with a nod and Alex could stay anonymous. He didn't want this desperate guy to know he even existed. Alex picked up the gun and opened the magazine. The chamber was empty. The barrel was scratched to pieces and the wood of the handle was smooth with use. The serial number was stamped on one side, though another number on the other side had been seared off. He shut the gun and held it on his shoulder. He looked through the sights up the hill. The scope on this weapon was more powerful than his, although the lens was scratched. There was that hare again! What was it doing out in broad daylight? Alex watched the hare until it vanished into a copse of gorse. Then he turned, lost his footing and stumbled into the stream behind him. As he rose from the water, he grabbed at

the bank. A helmet had passed by the stone wall, not one hundred yards away. Now another shadow chased down the wall, heading this way. Alex tried to think. If he ran in the direction of home they'd see him exposed on the hillside. But if he fled upstream they'd probably track him down.

His only choice was to hide.

Three men tipped into the glade. One was the blond soldier-boy with red-rimmed eyes. The others were just as bedraggled and dirty as he, with hot, tired faces, wearing helmets, backpacks and carrying identical rifles.

"This is the place," gasped the blond soldier, sweat pouring off him, trickling into his eyes and down his cheeks like tears. "Oh hell!"

"Calm down, Baz. We've still got time." A tall, dark-haired soldier who seemed in better shape than the others searched the riverbank. He was the only one of them who had a mouthpiece attached to a radio around his belt. His voice wavered. "So where did you leave it?"

"I can't remember." Baz looked terrified. "I'm done for. I'll be thrown out of the army, won't I?"

The dark-haired soldier touched his shoulder. "Calm down and start looking."

"You'll have the whole barracks in confinement," muttered the third soldier, stepping through the water. He was short and muscular and had a gruff voice. "You'll get us all done for gross negligence. I'm ashamed to be your brother."

The younger man went rigid. "I nearly passed out, Riley," he moaned. "People die on these moors in this heat."

"Getting lost on the moors for four hours is nothing to lose your gun over, Baz. Nothing is bad enough to lose your gun over. They say even if you get shot, you make sure you're holding on to it when you go down." Riley moodily parted the reeds with his sodden boot. "It's bad enough you cracking up in the bloody pipe earlier. And now this."

"Belt up and look for the bloody thing," said the dark-haired soldier.

But after a few minutes' searching, Baz collapsed on the bank.

"I'm dead," he said. "I'm well and truly dead. We'll never find it. I remember now where I left it – on that rock." He pointed to the flat stone. "And it's gone!"

His brother swore. "Stop being such a bloody fairy and help us."

The dark-haired soldier with the radio suggested that everyone form a line and sweep the area systematically. Baz heaved himself to his feet and began looking again.

"What's this?" Riley, the muscular soldier, toed the dead crow over the grass.

"That's what I haven't told you," said Baz. "I think someone was here just now. The bird had only just been killed when I got here. I thought I heard the shot. I thought it was Riley." He looked at the third soldier. "That's why I came here."

His companions exchanged glances.

“You’ve let an army weapon fall into civilian hands?” asked Riley. “That’s it then. No leave, no chow, no socials. Just hours of drills and more drills and turn-outs and an almighty lock-down.” He took off his hat to reveal a shining bald head. “There may even be a court martial.”

“He can’t have got far,” said the older soldier. “It’s a twenty-minute walk to the road, and there’s nothing else in any direction. You were here, what, ten minutes ago? He’s still close.”

“But who would come out here, Saul?” asked Riley.

“Walkers, farmers, kids,” Saul answered. He toed the dead bird. “If we can find him before he reports the gun, we’re in the clear. Look for tracks, freshly disturbed soil, broken twigs.” He pointed to the stone. “We’ll start there. We’ve got thirty minutes before we’ll be missed.”

“But what about the others? The exercise?” asked Riley, rubbing his bald skull.

“We’ve already messed up,” said Saul. “Now it’s damage limitation.”

He put a pair of binoculars to his eyes and scrutinized the surrounding hills.

The other two radiated out, treading softly, eyes to the ground. Baz was still having trouble with his breathing, but this new fear seemed to be reviving him.

Riley paused at the base of the big dead beech. He parted the ivy with the tip of his rifle.



“Here’s something,” he said. He held up a grid of dried mud, like the corner of a waffle. It was a square of mud from the tread of Alex’s boot.

The others waded over.

“He’s close,” said Saul.

